

SYRIA REBELS ANNOUNCE CAPTURE OF AL-BAB FROM IS

BEIRUT: Turkish-backed Syrian rebels announced yesterday they had taken full control of Al-Bab from the Islamic State group, marking a key defeat for the jihadists after weeks of heavy fighting. The town of Al-Bab, just 25 kilometers south of the Turkish border, was the last IS stronghold in the northern Syrian province of Aleppo. "We are announcing Al-Bab completely liberated, and we are now clearing mines from the residential neighborhoods," said Ahmad Othman, a rebel commander.

"After hours of fighting, we chased out the last remaining IS rank and file that were collapsing after the fierce shelling of their positions," he added. Turkey's state-run Anadolu Agency reported that rebels were now in control of central Al-Bab. It said fighters had surrounded the town to "break" IS's will but had held off on storming the centre "with the aim of preventing civilian casualties."

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights however said IS fighters were still present in parts of the town and the

rebels were in control of less than half of it. Rebels launched an offensive to capture Al-Bab last year with the support of Turkish ground troops, artillery and air strikes. Al-Bab was IS's last remaining stronghold in Aleppo province, after a US-backed alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters seized the town of Manbij in August. The jihadist group still controls a scattering of smaller villages and towns in the province.

Tall task ahead

Field commanders from two other

rebel factions in the town confirmed the capture of Al-Bab to AFP. "On Wednesday, we captured the city centre, which was IS's security zone... The jihadists collapsed, and this morning around 6 am (0400 GMT) we completed the operation," said Saif Abu Bakr, who heads the Al-Hamza rebel group. Abu Jaafar, another rebel field commander, said he expected clearing up operations would be wrapped up within hours. "Dozens of IS fighters were killed and we evacuated more than 50 families from inside Al-Bab," Abu Jaafar said. —AFP

HUNDREDS PROTEST AGAINST NETANYAHU'S AUSTRALIA TRIP

SYDNEY: Several hundred pro-Palestinian protesters demonstrated in Sydney yesterday against the first visit to Australia by an Israeli prime minister, branding Benjamin Netanyahu a "war criminal". A police helicopter hovered over the city as speakers slammed Canberra's strong support of Netanyahu and his government. "We are here to oppose Australia's support for Israel, for a racist apartheid nation," pro-Palestinian author and Australian lawyer Randa Abdel-Fattah said.

"It's disgusting to see that some of our Australian leaders have rolled out the red carpet and welcomed a war criminal into Australia," she said. "But there are so many Australians who are against this and we are raising our voices loudly and clearly today, to say (Prime Minister) Malcolm Turnbull, and (Foreign Minister) Julie Bishop, 'not in our name'," she added. A large banner was unfurled depicting Netanyahu with a moustache as Hitler and the word "Fascist" written underneath.

Pro-Israel supporters were also on the streets and The Australian newspaper reported that riot squad officers removed a man who approached the crowd shouting "long live Israel." The demonstrators, organized by the local Palestine Action Group, tried to march on Netanyahu's hotel but were cut off by police well short of the city centre building overlooking the harbor. Ahead of Netanyahu's arrival Wednesday, some 60 business leaders, academics, members of the clergy and former politicians signed a letter saying Australia should not welcome Netanyahu, claiming his policies "provoke, intimidate and oppress" the Palestinians. —AFP



ANKARA: This file photo shows academics and students shouting slogans during a protest against the dismissal of academics from universities following a post-coup emergency decree, in the Dil ve Tarih Coğrafya campus of Ankara University. —AFP

SACKED TURKISH ACADEMICS TAKE PROTEST TO THE STREETS

FIRED ACADEMICS PROVIDE FREE LESSONS ACROSS PARKS

ANKARA: In the heart of Ankara, Turkish communications lecturer Sevilya Celenk gives a lecture to dozens of attentive students. But her lecture is not taking place on a campus, or even in a hall, but at a park, where the crowd has braced the bitter cold to hear her. Celenk is one of about 5,000 Turkish academics who have been dismissed under a controversial state of emergency imposed after the failed July 15 coup. In a show of defiance across parks in Ankara, fired academics provide free lessons once every two weeks, lecturing on various topics including class and identity.

Since the coup attempt which tried to overthrow President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, over 100,000 people have been sacked or suspended from the public sector under emergency decrees. The university sector has been one of the hardest hit, with many lecturers accused of having links to US-based preacher Fethullah Gulen, whom Ankara has blamed for the coup attempt, and also to Kurdish militants.

Illegal dismissal

Celenk said that when she was dismissed in one of the emergency decrees on Jan 6, she felt anger at what she called a "frightening removal of any democratic, dissident, leftwing" section of society. "I felt a healthy anger, because we are faced

with a truly unjust, illegal and unfounded dismissal," she told AFP after her latest outdoor lecture to an audience including former students, on the concept of resistance. She says she has been targeted because she signed a petition along with over 2,000 other academics calling for peace in Turkey's restive southeast.

Among the 330 academics dismissed earlier this month, 115 had signed the petition, local media reported. Ibrahim Kaboglu, a prominent specialist on constitutional law, was also among the latest to be sacked. "They took away our right to education, to schooling. It's a frightening process. It's like they are trying to pour concrete on our school," Ilkyaz Gencdal, a former student of Celenk's at Ankara University, said after the 15-minute lecture. "Most of our classes have been left without a lecturer," Gencdal added.

No faculty at Ankara University will be shut down and that each department was finding replacements. The government has insisted that any mistakes will be rectified, and last month a decree was issued to set up a commission to assess appeals from people who claim they were wrongly suspended or fired. But the education ministry said it would not comment on individual cases.

Rights won on streets

Nuriye Gulmen was suspended last

year from her job as lecturer at Selcuk University in the central Turkish province of Konya, and formally sacked in January. Since November, she has been standing every day by an Ankara statue of a woman that celebrates human rights. Gulmen has been detained 23 times by the police during her nearly 100-day protest. "Until today, wherever there have been success for workers and the public-if they have won rights-they have won this on the street," Gulmen said. Her next move will be to go on hunger strike until she can return to her work. She was accused of having ties to Gulen's group, claims which she strongly denies, adding that she has not been shown any evidence.

Gulen, who lives in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania, has denied orchestrating the coup bid. Gulmen began her protest alone but she is now joined by other fired workers including Acun Karadag, a middle school teacher who said her doctor believed her dismissal caused heart problems. But Gulmen, who has previously been accused of links to a Marxist militant group but denies links to other illegal organizations, said "there was no other path" but street protests. "We are not rich people. Our families educated us with difficulty," Gulmen said, later adding she was living on people's sofas. —AFP

YEMEN LOYALISTS PUSH BACK REBELS ON RED SEA COAST

ADEN: Yemeni government forces made gains around the Red Sea coastal town of Mokha in heavy fighting overnight as they rebuffed a rebel counter-offensive, a military source said yesterday. Seven loyalist troops and 16 rebels were killed in the fighting, hospital sources said. Twelve soldiers and 28 rebels were wounded. Government forces captured Yakhtul, 14 kilometers north of Mokha, and Jabal al-Nar, 10 kilometers to the east, consolidating their grip on the town they overran on February 10, the military source said. Twelve rebels were taken prisoner.

On Tuesday, government forces had suffered a major setback in the offensive they launched in January to try to recapture Yemen's 450 kilometer Red Sea coastline, which had previously been almost entirely in rebel hands. Rebel forces counterattacked, killing a deputy army commander and 18 other troops. The loyalists' capture of Mokha was their biggest success in months. Despite nearly two years of military support from a Saudi-led coalition, government forces are largely restricted to the south and areas along the Saudi border. The rebels still hold the capital Sanaa and much of the central and northern highlands as well as most of the Red Sea coast.

The government's next goal is the main Red Sea port city of Hodeida, a vital conduit for UN-supervised aid deliveries to rebel-held areas. Coalition air strikes on Hodeida province late on Wednesday killed seven rebels and wounded 15, military sources said. The raids targeted an arms warehouse in Bayt al-Faqih and a missile launcher in Bajil. —AFP